

A Journey to Serve: A Chinese American Woman's Service in the Canadian Armed Forces during WW II

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In July 1943, my 19 year old mother, May Yee (aka May Toy Shiu), attempted to enter Canada through Windsor, Ontario intending to join the Canadian Army Auxiliary Corps. Denied entry because she lacked proof of her US citizenship, she returned to Chicago, Illinois where she appeared on July, 23, 1943, before the District Director of Immigration and Naturalization who determined that she was indeed, born in Chicago, Illinois on December 28, 1923 to Chinese immigrant parents. Initially, she sought to join the US Armed Forces but was denied because of her age. However, a Canadian recruiter informed her that women could serve in the Canadian Armed Forces at 18 years of age and recruited her to serve. Thus, began a journey that would cross geographic borders, intersect with the anti-Chinese immigration policies of both the US and Canada, and where she would participate in the little told story of minority women's service in WW II on behalf of both Canada and the United States. This paper presents her narrative of service. Embedded in this narrative is her triumph over gender bias, reflected in her personal story of birth as an ill-fated Chinese daughter and the tenacious strength of a young Chinese American woman who sought first to serve her country of birth, the United States, and subsequently, Canada during WWII. Through the narrative construction of her story, this paper examines the broader themes of Chinese women in the Americas: gender identity and power; changing patterns of kinship influenced by immigration and the policies that shaped acculturation to different social norms, and the liminality of a gendered, ethnic minority self that was challenged to balance multiple social worlds.

Research Statement

There is limited literature on the military service of Chinese Canadians during WW II; the literature on Chinese Canadian women is even more scant. These voices deserve more than silence and the contributions of their service need to join all those who served for proper acknowledgement. Additionally, my mother, as a Chinese American woman who served in the Canadian armed forces, may well be the only Chinese American female veteran of the Canadian armed forces during WW II. Embedding her narrative of service within the larger historical context of military service during WW II contributes to the larger social discourse of military service of Chinese North Americans on behalf of both Canada and the United States.

Methodology

The methodological approach utilized in this paper is qualitative. One function of qualitative inquiry is to make sense of personal stories; how they are embedded in larger social, cultural and historical contexts and how emerging larger themes intersect with the collective stories of shared lived experiences. Data for this proposed paper has been collected from digitally recorded, open-ended and semi-structured interviews, notes from family stories collected during family visits, family reunions and cross-sharing of family stories with my cousin, Pamela Jadeen (Chin) Yee. Jadeen has also documented through archival research the Shiu (Moy) family immigration history to Chicago, Illinois across three generations. Additionally, we have worked collaboratively on identifying the documentation of my mother's (her maternal Aunt) service during WW II in the Canadian Armed Forces. Additional data, specific to my mother's service, was collected through digitally recorded interviews, structured around photographs from my mother's photo album taken during the time of her service in Nanaimo, British Columbia where she was stationed. Additionally, a literature review of Chinese participation in the war effort on behalf of Canada during WW II has been conducted.